

UNDER A SPELL

By
HILDA RHODES.

There was considerable excitement in the village of Brackenbush when it became known that Brackenbush Hall had at last found a tenant. It was a picturesque old place, and had belonged to an old titled family, which had sunk deeper and deeper into the slough of debt, till at length the owner of the place had been obliged to sell it to pay importunate creditors. Every one wondered what kind of man the incoming tenant would be—would he live in the style befitting the old mansion, or would he prove to be an impudent upstart with vulgar pretensions and no ancestors? There was a feeling of relief among certain people when it was known that the new-comer was known as Sidney Carruthers, for this at least was a name with a fairly aristocratic flavor about it.

In a few weeks' time curiosity was gratified by the arrival of Mr. Carruthers. He proved to be a tall man of about fifty, of very slender build, with perfectly good hair, and a solemn, somewhat saturnine cast of face, lit by a pair of remarkably brilliant, deep-set eyes of greenish hazel color. With him came his niece and ward, Violet Carruthers, a girl of about eighteen, a delicate-looking blonde, with masses of pale gold hair, and large, dreamy blue eyes, under arching brows, and beautifully molded, almost transparent-looking temples.

It was the unconscious influence of those large, mystic-looking eyes which finally captivated the wandering attention of Laurence Steer. It happened on a Sunday in July, a few weeks after the arrival of Mr. Carruthers and his niece, and the two were seated together in the new which had belonged to the family at the hall. Steer saw the pair there for the first time, having been in London when they had arrived and having only just returned. He looked casually at the grave, impassive countenance of Sidney Carruthers, and then turned his gaze on the girl at his side. Laurence Steer was nearly six feet tall, of a somewhat massive build, but both strong and agile, with tapering fingers. Then she suddenly raised her eyes—those large, child-like eyes which yet had something dreamy and spiritual in their depths; and these added the last fatal fascination. Laurence Steer, being young, and as yet having his heart in his own possession, felt it throb magically at the encounter with Violet Carruthers's glance. He sought anxiously during the ensuing days for an introduction to Miss Carruthers, but failed to accomplish his object. It soon became known, moreover, that she did not go much into society, and that Mr. Carruthers was something of a recluse. Laurence Steer's father was a solicitor, and he was one day sent for by Mr. Carruthers, who wished to consult him upon a matter of business.

"What sort of—people are they, dad?" asked Laurence, upon his father's return from his interview with Mr. Carruthers.

"He is a clever man," said the solicitor, slowly. "A very clever man, I should say, but there's something about his eyes I don't like—there's a snakey look about them. Then he is very young, and I don't like him. I believe I'm giving in to a ridiculous fancy quite out of keeping with my reputation as a sensible man of law; and Mr. Carruthers's niece seems quite devoted to him."

"Oh, you saw her, did you?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Steer, "and a very pretty young woman, but almost too frail and ethereal looking for this world. I understand Mr. Carruthers has scientific tastes; he told me he preferred solitude and his books and laboratory to going into society or entertaining hosts of acquaintances."

"Is she Miss Carruthers?" said Laurence.

"Is she, too, fond of solitude?"

"I don't know," replied his father, "but she seems rather shy and completely wrapped up in her uncle."

This information was somewhat discouraging; but at last the sought-for opportunity arrived. Laurence Steer met Violet Carruthers at a tennis party, and was formally introduced to her.

The first words they exchanged were merely conventional and ordinary. Then, when Laurence had ascertained that Mr. Carruthers did not care to play tennis, they seated themselves under a shady elm tree, and the conversation soon drifted into more personal topics. Steer found his companion charming. There was a childlike naivete about her, combined with a depth of heart and cultivation of mind which appealed to him irresistibly.

"Shall I see you at the Martindale's water picnic?" asked the young man.

"No, I am afraid not," answered Violet Carruthers, a little regretfully it seemed to Laurence.

"Perhaps you have not yet made their acquaintance?" he questioned.

"Yes, they have called upon us," replied the girl, "and we are invited to the picnic; but Mr. Carruthers is expecting a great professor coming to stay with him, and he arrives on the day of the picnic; so, of course, uncle cannot go, and I must stay to receive his guest."

Steer mentally anathematized the "great professor." "What a pity!" he said, earnestly. "I do not know, then, when I may have the pleasure of seeing you again."

Violet Carruthers flushed a little under his gaze. "I don't know," she said, shyly.

"But surely you like going to picnics and things of that sort, don't you?" he asked.

"No, I don't care," began Miss Carruthers; then, as if something in his eyes wrung the words from her: "I don't know how it is," she said, "but just now I feel as if I would love to go to the picnic, and to the Lewisham's garden fete, and—and to everything; but generally I feel as if I want to see no one but Uncle Sidney, and don't care a bit for going about."

"Surely it is only natural for you, at your age, to like gaiety," said the young man, gently. "Have you and your uncle lived long together?"

"My father died about three years ago," replied Violet Carruthers, and "Mr. Carruthers is my guardian; and I have lived with him since my father's death."

In the cool of the evening, when the guests departed, Steer escorted Miss Carruthers home. They met Mr. Carruthers at the lodge gates. He gave a keen look at the young man, as his niece introduced him, and then Laurence knew what his father meant by the snaky glitter in Mr. Carruthers's eyes. They had a cold, stony look, as if they penetrated right into the very soul, and could read every secret thought and motive there. Steer felt as if his sudden and deep passion for the girl and his side was seen by those eyes, seen—and opposed.

Mr. Carruthers greeted him coldly, but courteously.

"Well, my child," he said to Violet, "have you had a happy time?"

The girl slipped her arm lovingly through his. "I am glad it's over," she said, "for I am always happiest alone with you, Uncle Sidney."

The words gave a little stab of pain to Steer, as he marked the blue eyes grow dark and intense and noted the tone of affection in the girl's voice.

"Tut, tut!" said her uncle, laughing a little. "Foolish child! I am too old and too much of a bookworm for you; you should like young society. Mr. Steer, there, is a finer companion for you than an old reclusive such as I."

"I want no one but you," said the girl, "and I grudge every moment passed away from you."

"Good evening, Miss Carruthers," said Steer, who felt chilled and disappointed by this speech.

"Good evening, Mr. Steer," replied Miss Carruthers, giving him a limp, cold smile and speaking so indifferently as to make her manner almost discourteous.

Laurence Steer walked home perplexed. His perplexity increased rather than diminished as his knowledge of Miss Carruthers deepened. She did not go into society much, but they met occasionally at social functions. He also discovered that she liked to go and read in a certain field, at the bottom of which flowed the river, and where the trees made a shady retreat from the heat of the sun. He ventured, whenever he dared, to intrude, by accident as it were, upon her solitude, and sometimes she would receive him very sweetly, would talk graciously to him, and it would almost seem to him that she had divined his love for her and was not wholly indifferent to his influence; then the next time they met she would be frigid and indifferent, apparently absorbed in thoughts in which he had no place, and he would cudge his brains unavailingly to discover what could be the cause of this change in her. He tried, in order to make an ally of Mr. Carruthers, to get upon friendly terms with him, but this was difficult, for Mr. Carruthers refused to be on friendly terms with anyone. He led the life of a student, shut up for days in his laboratory, and emerging at last with a haggard, his eyes shining with the brilliancy of fever and consuming unrest. It was also noted that Miss Carruthers shared in her uncle's scientific pursuits, for some times she would not be seen for weeks outside the hall, and visitors became fewer and fewer when they were constantly being informed Mr. Carruthers and his niece were engaged on important business, and therefore could not receive them.

On one occasion when Miss Carruthers had been invisible for a week or two, Laurence Steer began almost to fear he should never behold his love again, when, upon strolling almost hopelessly through the meadow she frequented, he saw her, to his great joy, book in hand, walking slowly towards him. She looked to his anxious eyes even more fragile than her wont. Her face was pale, even the delicate pink under the transparent skin was gone, and her eyes had violet shadows under them, and had a weary look which alarmed him.

"Surely, Miss Carruthers," he said, after they had exchanged greetings, "you are not looking well. Have you been ill?"

"Oh, no," said the girl. "I have not been ill. But I think it must be the hot weather which tries me. I feel so tired."

"I have not seen you for ages," said Steer, reproachfully. "Where have you been hidden away all this time?"

"I have been very busy," she answered. "Uncle Sidney has been engaged in some very interesting scientific experiments, and he likes me to be with him when he is working."

"It's abominably selfish of him," thought Steer, not daring to utter the thought aloud. "Keeping the poor child shut up when she ought to be out of doors in the sunshine."

That afternoon Violet was in one of her very sweetest moods. She allowed herself to be persuaded to turn back and sit on the river bank with Steer at her side. She blushed shyly when he begged her to give him the little bunch of forget-me-nots she wore at her throat. But she did not withhold it, and her compliance with his request filled him with hope. He ventured then to show her more plainly than he had dared to do before how much she was to him, and she received his advances shyly, but apparently with no displeasure, and he felt he had fair ground for hope.

He determined that the wisest course to pursue would be to approach Mr. Carruthers on the subject and see if he had any reasonable objections to make to his winning. If he could, his niece's affection. She was such a child in years he dare not ask her definitely to be his wife without the approval of her guardian. He felt, however, a strange reluctance to taking Mr. Carruthers into his confidence. He had tried hard for Violet's sake to overcome his instinctive aversion and mistrust of the man, but so far in vain. He determined, however, to take what was obviously the most straightforward course and called at the hall and asked to see Mr. Carruthers.

"The servant led him to Mr. Carruthers's study and went to inform his master of his arrival. In a minute or two's time Mr. Carruthers entered the room, and with a quick beating heart the young man made his confession, and stated modestly but fairly confidently what his pecuniary prospects were, and then waited for Mr. Carruthers's reply.

For a minute or two after Steer spoke there was silence. Then Mr. Carruthers said, fixing those odd, bird-like eyes upon the young man's face: "I am very sorry to hear this, Mr. Steer, very sorry, both for your sake and for the sake of my poor niece. Marriage for her, alas! is out of the question. Surely, Mr. Steer, you, who will have observed her closely, cannot have failed to notice her strange manner at times?"

Laurence Steer grew pale. "What do you mean to imply, Mr. Carruthers?" he asked, striving to speak calmly.

Mr. Carruthers sighed. "This is, indeed, a painful subject to me, but it is possible, Mr. Steer, you have not seen that my poor niece is at times not herself—that, in fact, her mind is at times unhinged?"

"Unhinged?" said Steer, hoarsely. Then he shut up here with you alone. She has no other companions. No wonder she becomes a little morbid at times; but I could swear her brain is as clear as yours or mine."

"It is only natural that you should wish to think so," said Mr. Carruthers, and Laurence Steer could not resist the fancy that there was a note of triumph in his voice. "Therefore, painful though it is to me, I cannot but in fairness to you and to myself verify the statement I have made. I suppose, Mr. Steer, if you saw my niece in one of her worst attacks, when her mind is completely thrown off its balance, you would then believe in the truth of the sad and terrible affliction?"

Dreading what was to come, but feeling the suspense too awful to be borne, Steer assented.

A quarter of an hour later Laurence Steer was walking down the avenue away from the hall. His face was gray and stern, his gait uncertain. He had, indeed, experienced a terrible shock. He had seen Violet Carruthers, the girl he had loved—and loved still—apparently quite unconscious of his presence, raging round the room in a paroxysm of madness, with eyes from which the childlike, trustful gaze had gone, and instead a terrible fury glared. She had seized upon an ivory paper cutter, and gone through a ghastly pretense of killing herself, and then, with a wild cry, had fallen senseless to the ground. Mr. Carruthers had administered some sort of draught to her, saying to Steer as he did so: "She will now sleep for some hours, and I will awake herself again, and quite unconscious of what has passed. You see now, Mr. Steer, my words were but too true. I have striven to keep my secret, and no one here knows of my niece's affliction. I know I need bind you by no promise to keep it as sacred."

Upon leaving the lodge gates, Steer instinctively made his way to a little wood near the roadside, where cool depths invited him to a rest retreat where he might face this terrible trouble unscathed and undisturbed. He could not fully realize this awful revelation, which had come as a deadly blow to all his hopes. Notwithstanding the evidence of sight and hearing, something more powerful than reason forbade the belief that Violet Carruthers was really insane. Her manner, whose cool depths had been changeable—erratic even—but nothing had been seen in her then had ever led him to fear that her reason was unshaken.

"I can't believe it," he said, doggedly. "I mistrust that man still; there is something about him that repels me, something in the look in his eyes which forces me to hate him. And yet I saw it all with my own eyes! Oh, my little love, I cannot believe it!"

Steer arrived home looking so white and ill that the quick eyes of his sister at once detected that something was wrong with him. When tea was over she drew him into the garden.

"Laurence," she said, "what's the matter, dear? You look simply awful!"

He tried to smile. "Do I?" he said. "Well, little girl, the truth is—"

"You have proposed to Miss Carruthers and she has refused you?" cried his sister, quickly.

Her brother's love for Violet Carruthers was no secret to her, and she had hoped, for his sake, his wooing would be successful.

"No, not exactly," he said, "but you are right—that is the trouble. Miss Carruthers can never be my wife."

"Oh, Laurie," cried Lucie Steer, "has that horrid old guardian of hers refused to let her marry you?"

"What is your candid opinion of Mr. Carruthers?" said Steer, ignoring the question.

"I don't like him at all," said Lucie, "and I think Violet would be ever so much richer if he would allow her to do as she likes. Why does he keep her shut up in his old laboratory? I'm sure she can't like living in it at her age. Why, she is younger than I am! But, Laurie, are you quite, quite sure that she is hopeless? Don't you think in time—"

"I fear Miss Carruthers and I can never be anything more than friends," said Steer. "We won't talk any more about it just now, dear."

Lucie sighed and said no more, but she still cherished the hope that some day her brother would obtain his heart's desire, and that Violet Carruthers would be his wife.

Several weeks passed, and then Steer encountered Violet Carruthers as he was cycling through the village. He felt impelled to stop and speak to her, in spite of everything, for he longed to hear her voice once more, and hold her hand in his. Her eyes were their old trustful, innocent look, and she spoke to him with a sweetness that wrung his heart, remembering as he did the last occasion on which he had seen her, and knowing that they were separated by an impassable barrier. He dare not speak of love, but he asked her to allow him to be always her friend. "If you are ever in any trouble or danger," he said, "and need a friend's assistance, shall I deem it my greatest happiness if I can help you?"

"Thank you, Mr. Steer," said Violet, her color rising. "I know you would be a true and loyal friend. I am very anxious now," she added after a pause, "about my uncle. I fear he is working too hard, and will bring on a serious illness if he goes on much longer. He locks himself up nearly all day in the laboratory, and will hardly take food or rest. I wish you could see him. Mr. Steer, I feel sure you would agree with me that he is looking wretchedly ill."

She spoke so rationally, and her eyes were so clear and intelligent, Steer felt as if he must have been dreaming, and that the scene he had witnessed at the hall was only a horrible nightmare, from which he had just been awakened; and, yet, Mr. Carruthers had assured him that after a short period of sanity another paroxysm of madness would seize the poor child. He groaned in his heart as he watched the mobile, expressive face.

"I have not seen Mr. Carruthers for some time," he replied to her. "It is indeed a pity that he should destroy his health in the pursuit of knowledge."

"That is just what I tell him," said Violet Carruthers, sorrowfully, "but he takes no notice of what I say."

Shortly after this Steer saw Mr. Carruthers driving through the village, and he could but indorse what his niece had said. His spare frame looked painfully gaunt and emaciated. His face had a greyish pallor, and his eyes a strained, unnatural look, as if sleep never visited them or brought relief to his overworked brain. "If he goes on much longer," said Steer to himself, "he will undoubtedly break down and have brain fever or something of the kind. He felt uneasy at the thought of Violet left in charge of this fanatic scientist, and was glad that he had made his promise to seek his aid should she ever be in need of it."

This promise was repeated soon after he had seen Mr. Carruthers. After their last conversation Steer had made up his mind to see as little as possible of Violet Carruthers. One day, notwithstanding this wise resolution, he felt impelled, by an impulse he could not resist, to go to the meadow where they had last met. He felt a premonition that Violet wanted him, and whatever pain might lie in their meeting for him, he could not resist the thought that he could render her any service, however trifling. He found her standing by the river as if waiting for some one.

She greeted him with a little cry of pleasure. "Oh, Mr. Steer," she cried, "I did so hope I should see you. I prayed that you might come."

"What is it?" he said. "Nothing very serious, I hope?"

"It is my uncle," said the girl. "I fear he is very, very ill, and I do not know what to do. I am afraid," lowering her voice. "I am afraid he is going mad—Steer started involuntarily—and I dare not send for a doctor. My uncle hates doctors, and will not have one in the house, and I have no one else to turn to. If you would only come up to the hall with me and see Uncle Sidney, then, perhaps, you could persuade him to lie down and have some food and rest."

Steer hesitated. What if the poor child's anxiety had made her fancy that her uncle was really worse than he was? And would not Mr. Carruthers consider him an improper intruder?

Violet read the hesitation in his face. "Oh, don't refuse, Mr. Steer!" she said, imploringly. "I am so frightened; and if you will not help me, what shall I do?"

Her tears were falling by now, and this determined him. Whatever might be the consequences, he would keep his promise to her.

"If you really think my going with you will do any good," he said, "I am quite willing to accompany you to the hall at once."

"Oh, thank you!" Her face lighted up as if by magic, and the look in her eyes showed him how much his compliance gratified her. "We will go now, then," she said, and side by side they walked through the meadows.

When they found themselves inside Mr. Carruthers's laboratory, the door of which, fortunately for them, they found unlocked, Mr. Carruthers paid no attention to their entrance. He was standing at the far end of the room, gesticulating and speaking aloud in a hoarse, shrill voice. They stood and watched him silently.

"Gentlemen," he was saying, "for many years I have devoted myself to researches in the vast field of psychical science. I have, with infinite pains and labor, made myself familiar with the knowledge of occult arts as practiced by the Chaldeans and the Magi of the Egyptians in the days of old, and I have learnt the secret power held by the Brahmins of India. I have witnessed, under strictly test conditions, the phenomena of so-called spiritualism and have discovered much that is yet unknown of the nature and wonderful effect of animal magnetism, odic force, and the power of mind over matter. I have studied the whole rationale of hypnotism, and I have had most conclusive and marvelous tests as to the truth and value of clairvoyance, or second sight. I have here, under my roof a young girl, who, when put into a trance state by my marvelous clairvoyance and odic force. When in trance she can describe any given event taking place, at no matter what distance of time or space. The past is as an open book to her and she can relate, with the accuracy of an eyewitness, every detail of any period of history. By means of her seership I have before me the glorious possibility of reviewing at my leisure whole periods of time. Nothing that has occurred in the world's history since man's creation can be withheld from me so long as my sensitive retains her wonderful powers. Up to the present I have complete sway over her, and before showing you some extraordinary proofs of the truth of what I have been saying, I will show you a few instances of the power of suggestion over the mind of the sensitive."

Laurence Steer started forward with an incoherent exclamation as Mr. Carruthers paused in his speech.

"Ah, you, professor," said Mr. Carruthers, turning towards Steer and smiling wildly. "You and I are old rivals. Come, I will show you something by and by which will surprise you. At present I will just show you a few simple experiments by way of preparing you for what is to follow."

Then he fixed his eyes upon Violet's face. "Come here," he said in a low, authoritative voice. As if under a spell the girl advanced towards him.

"You are Charlotte Corday," said Sidney Carruthers.

Kind Lady—Poor fellow, have you no friends? Hap Hazard—No, mum, I ain't got nobody but relatives.

The girl's manner changed; even her face seemed to alter, and its soft, round contour became set in firmer lines and wore an expression of serene majesty. She placed one hand on her bosom and bent down as if listening to some one speaking; then with a sudden movement the hand on her breast was withdrawn and she struck once downwards at an imaginary figure near her.

"That, gentlemen, is the germ from which—" Mr. Carruthers said; then he threw up his hands and fell forward.

When Steer bent over him he found the man was dead; the overtaxed heart and brain had ceased to work. But, thank heaven, Sidney Carruthers had revealed in his madness, brought on by excessive study, the truth about Violet Carruthers. She was not tainted with the terrible disease of insanity, but, being sensitive to influence, she had been spellbound by a will stronger than her own.

Shortly after Carruthers's death strange things came to light in his past life. It was discovered that he was a member of a secret psychological society in France and that he had done much in his search for occult wisdom which proved his ideas of right and wrong were extremely crude and his whole moral nature warped and distorted. He had evidently in his niece a valuable instrument for aiding him in his studies, and he had used her as a tool in his researches and experiments. It was now obvious to Laurence Steer that on the day when he had seen Violet in a frenzy of apparent insanity she was simply obeying the suggestion of her master, and that Mr. Carruthers had his own cruel expedient in order to effectually prevent his niece's marriage, when he would lose his influence and power over her.

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SPHINX LORE

Enigmatic Knots of Odd and Ingenious Kind for the Leisure Hour.

[Any communication intended for this department should be addressed to E. R. Chadborn, Lewiston, Maine.]

81.—COMBINATIONS.



By combining one of the above objects with each of the others in turn, get the following: 1. A paper signed in a certain peculiar way. 2. A disk-shaped body. 3. A rubber protector around a horse's fetlock, to prevent injury by interfering. 4. A mold having in section a reverse or long S curve.

82.—TERMINAL ELISION.

Along by the orchard, beginning to burrow. And fresh from a trimming, yet not over trim. The snapper, quite like an amateur surgeon. Goes ONE for some weakness of heart, trunk, or limb.

The TWO shouts aloud in his jubilant frenzy. His love and return to his dear native tree. The snowbird has come to explore the Mackenzie. Or, over in Asia, he sings by the THREE.

The frogs wake, and rise from the bed of the river. And all talk at once as they sit on the shore.